

# Wildlife Express

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## AMERICAN MARTEN

Pine Marten CCBY Michelle Holihan, Shutterstock

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# THE AMERICAN MARTEN

Cute is one of the best words to describe American martens! They look a bit like a small, slender house cat with a long, bushy tail.

American martens are 18 to 26 inches long and weigh only one to three pounds. They have pointed faces with big round ears. American martens' beautiful fur is brown to black in color and silky soft. On their throats, they have a splash of color that is creamy white to orange.

You may hear people call American martens, pine martens because they live in dense forests. American martens are excellent tree climbers. They have semi-retractable claws similar to a cat. With their claws and long tail for balance, American martens can zip up a tree and leap between trees quickly and easily. In Idaho, they are found in conifer forests. A forest floor covered with fallen logs, stumps and shrubs makes the best habitat. The trees on the ground are the perfect place to find shelter and food.

What do American martens eat? They mostly eat voles. Voles are small rodents that look like mice. Martens run around on the forest floor poking their heads into holes, fallen logs and rocks looking for

voles. They may ambush their prey or leap from a "hunting perch" in a tree. American martens also eat red squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, insects, birds, eggs, fruits and berries.

American martens are animals that like to live alone. The only time American martens are seen together is during the breeding season or when mothers have young. Marten babies, called kits, are born in March or April. The mother chooses a hole in a tree or similar cozy spot to have her kits. Between one to five kits are born. The young are helpless, blind and tiny when born. They weigh only as much as three crayons! Kits may be small when born, but they grow quickly drinking their mother's milk. For the first six weeks of their lives, the kits are nursed by their mother. When the kits are six to seven weeks old, the mother will start to wean them and bring them meat to eat. By the time the kits are three months old, they are nearly full-grown and able to live on their own.

Next time you are in an Idaho forest, don't forget to look up. You may be lucky enough to see a curious American marten looking back at you. You may even see it leaping and jumping from tree to tree!





# The Weasel Family



**M**embers of the weasel family are called mustelids (mus-TELL-ids). In Latin, “mustela” means weasel. This group of animals includes wolverine, badger, fisher, weasels, American marten, mink, and otters. In Idaho, we have eight species of mustelids.

Mustelids are found on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. They range in size from the sea otter that can weigh as much as a third-grader to the least weasel, which weighs about

the same as two pinkie erasers.

Wolverines are the largest mustelid in Idaho; they usually weigh between 20 to 40 pounds. Short-tailed weasels are the smallest. They are eight to 14 inches long and weigh two to seven ounces.

Most mustelids have long, slender bodies and short legs. Their shape helps them to more easily get into tight spaces or move through the water. Even the bulky-looking badger and wolverine are amazingly flexible and quick. Several species, including the marten and fisher, are excellent climbers. The otters and mink are wonderful swimmers and spend a lot of time in the water.

The long, thin shape of mustelids makes it difficult to stay warm and

store fat, so they eat a lot. As a family, mustelids are mainly carnivores. They eat other animals, but they may also eat fruits, berries or plants. When a mustelid kills more than it can eat at one sitting, it saves the rest for another meal. The leftovers are hidden in a place called a “cache” (cash). When the animal is hungry, it will return to the cache and finish eating its catch.

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They stink! Mustelids have glands located at the base of the tail that make musk. Musk is a strongly scented liquid. It may be used to attract a mate or to mark their homes or territories. The smell tells other members of the same species to stay out! Some mustelids mark their caches with musk. By doing this, they are warning others to stay away from their food. The smell also helps them locate the cache later.

Keep an eye out for mustelids while enjoying time in Idaho’s forests. These active, curious and strong creatures can be very entertaining to watch!





# Furbearers in Idaho History

Beaver Fur CCBY clouttail, Flickr

**F**urbearers are animals that are trapped or hunted for their fur. Furbearers are the reason European people first came to this area.

In the early 1800s, furs were used to make coats, hats, gloves and other pieces of clothing. The American marten was called the American sable in Europe. The sable is closely related to our marten. Sable fur was worn only by royalty and nobles. As sables became harder to find, people trapped American martens and shipped them to Europe to use in place of sables.

Beaver trapping had a huge impact on Idaho history. Beaver hats were very popular; every man wanted one. Soon beavers were harder to find in the Eastern United States and Canada. This brought trappers to what we now call Idaho.

In 1809, David Thompson built Kullyspell House by Lake Pend Oreille. This was the first European building constructed in Idaho. The house was built for the Northwest Fur Company. Soon other trappers heard about all the beavers in the area. By

1811, four fur companies were trapping beavers and other

animals in the area. Mountain men that were not members of fur companies were also trapping animals.

Many countries wanted the riches of this land for themselves. Great Britain operated The Hudson's Bay Fur Company. They wanted to keep Americans from expanding westward to claim the land. Their solution was to create a "fur desert" to keep the Americans out of the area. They thought that if they trapped all the beavers, no Americans would want to live here. Between 1818 and 1827, they trapped 85,000 beavers out of the Snake River alone! Now that is a lot of beavers. Trapping all of those beavers didn't keep Americans out of the area. Russia gave the Northwest Territory, which included Idaho, to the United States in 1824.

Pioneers and homesteaders also trapped animals. Trapping was one way to feed a family and earn money. Some animals, especially beavers, were becoming hard to find. Too many beavers were being trapped. Some people thought beavers needed protection. In 1899, a law was passed that protected beavers from being trapped or hunted. The law helped and beavers become more common. In 1957, people were once again allowed to trap beavers. With proper laws and management, Idaho will always have furbearers.



**Beaver Pelt**

CCBY The US National Archives



**Kullyspell House**

CCBY John Bish, Barren Magazine





# Fantastic Fur

**M**any animals are covered by what is called fur. You know what fur looks like. Martens, bears and coyotes are all covered by fur. It looks like long, soft hair. However, there is more to fur than meets the eye.

Fur is made up of two different layers of hairs. Guard hairs make up the top layer. These hairs do just what their name says. They guard and protect the animal's second layer of fur and skin from weather and water. Often guard hairs are shiny, because animals put oil on them. Animals that spend a lot of time in water, like beavers and otters, don't want their fur and skin to get wet. They might get too cold if they got wet. Water hits the oily guard hairs and runs off the animals' backs, keeping their fur dry.

Some animals, like beavers, have special glands that make oil just for spreading on their fur. Beaver oil glands are at the base of their tail. Other animals have very small oil glands all over their skin to help keep the guard hairs oily.

The second layer of fur is called underfur. It is shorter than the guard hairs. Underfur

is usually very soft and fluffy. It helps keep animals warm. Animals fluff up their underfur and trap air in it. The animals' bodies warm the trapped air. The warmed air acts like insulation, and the animals stay nice and cozy. This is what happens when you put on a coat. Your body heats the air trapped by the coat, and you stay warmer.

Some animals with fur also have other special hairs on their bodies. Can you think of any? Porcupines may come to mind. Porcupines have quills in their fur. The quills are special hard hairs that protect porcupines from their enemies. When danger is near, porcupines will arch their backs and tuck their heads under their bodies. This makes the quills stick straight up in the air. If an animal tries to touch the porcupine, it will get a quill in its body. Porcupines cannot shoot quills out of their bodies, as some people may have heard. Remember, a quill is just a hair. You can't shoot hairs out of your head, so porcupines can't shoot quills out of their bodies.

Fur is a fantastic way for animals to stay warm during the cold winter!





**S**ome animals have hair on their bodies instead of fur. Fur is made of two different layers of hairs. Hair is usually just one layer, and all the hairs look alike. Hairs are usually thick and stiff. Deer and elk have hair, so do you!

If you looked closely at a deer hair, you would see that it looks a bit like a straw. The hair is hollow. Animals with fur trap air to stay warm. Well, so do animals with hair. When they are cold, they stick their hairs up. They trap air inside and in between all of their hairs. The air trapped in the hair and in between the hair makes a nice coat of insulation against the cold.


If you ever get goosebumps look at the bumps on your arm. You will see a hair sticking up in the middle of the bumps. Your body gets cold and tries to trap air by making your hair stand up. We are not very good at trapping air in our

hair. Our hairs are too thin and short to trap air.

Many animals grow a thicker layer of hair for the winter. More hair means they can trap more air and stay warmer. Some animals with hair grow a thick woolly layer of special hair close to their skin. Caribou do this. The woolly layer of hair is similar to the underfur that animals with fur have. In the winter, caribou are out in temperatures that can get down to 60 degrees below zero! Now that's cold. Their woolly layer of hair insulates them from the cold and helps to block the icy wind.

In the spring, animals will shed their winter hair and grow thinner summer coats. Animals often look shaggy and strange when they are shedding their long winter coats. People may even think an animal is sick. Once the silky summer hairs grow back, the animal will look good again.





**Y**ou're walking along a trail. All of a sudden, you see something grayish-white peeking out of the tall grass. Leaning forward, you realize what it is – a skull. Now the mystery really begins. What animal did that skull belong to, and how did it live its life?

This may be a hard question to answer, but the skull will give you some clues. One of the best clues you have is the teeth. Teeth tell you what an animal eats. Animals that eat meat need teeth that will help them cut and tear. Meat eaters, called carnivores, have meat-cutting teeth along their cheeks. These teeth are sharp and pointed. When the top teeth and the bottom teeth come together, the teeth pass each other like scissors. Martens have no trouble slicing through a mouse with their teeth!

Sharp pointed teeth may work well for meat-eaters, but they sure wouldn't help plant-eaters. Plant eaters are called herbivores. It takes a lot of chewing to break down plants. Just think how long you need to chew celery! Herbivores have tall teeth in the back of their mouths with flat tops. Flat teeth let the animals slide their top and bottom teeth against each other and grind plants.

We have teeth in the back of our mouths with low bumpy crowns, so do bears. Teeth with this shape belong to omnivores. Omnivores eat both meat and plants, so they need teeth that help cut and grind.

The location of the eye sockets on the skull can also tell you a lot. Predators, animals that eat other animals, need to be able to tell distances. This comes in handy when reaching out to grab a mouse. Predators have eyes that face forward. Prey animals, animals that other animals eat, have their eyes located more to the sides of their heads. This lets them be on the lookout for danger in almost every direction without ever moving their heads.

Looking at these clues may not tell you what animal the skull came from, but it is a start. It may give you an idea of what the animal eats and whether it is a predator or prey animal.

# WHAT'S THAT?



# Wonderful Whiskers

**A**merican martens have whiskers on their faces that help them while hunting. Other animals depend on whiskers, as well.

Imagine you are an animal hunting during a dark, moonless night. Your eyes, although designed to work in low light, are having a difficult time seeing. You are hungry, and you know a mouse must be nearby. How are you going to find the mouse if you can't see it? Use your whiskers to feel the vibrations caused by the mouse moving.

Whiskers are great tools for animals that hunt at night or in dark places. Whiskers are special hairs that are very sensitive to touch and movement. All mammals, except humans, have whiskers. Although men's beards are called whiskers, they are just body hairs. Animal whiskers are different than the whiskers on a man's beard.

Whiskers are called vibrissae (vy-BRISS-ee). They are thicker and rooted deeper in the skin than

regular hairs. When something touches a whisker, the information goes down the hair to the nerves. The nerves tell the brain what the whiskers have felt.

Whiskers not only grow on animals' faces. Cats, foxes and squirrels have whiskers on their ankles. Some bats have them on their rumps, and underground burrowers, like moles, have whiskers behind their ears and on their tails and front feet. Flying squirrels use whiskers on their heads, feet and legs to help them find their way through trees at night.

Sometimes animals use whiskers to greet. When two rats meet, they rub their whiskers over each other. This helps them to identify the other rat.

Mammals would have a difficult time getting around and catching food without their whiskers. Whiskers help animals stay in touch with their environment.



Photos left to right, top to bottom: Pine Marten CCBY Yankech Gary, Flickr, Flying Squirrel CCBY Judy Gallagher, Flickr, Mole CCBY Link576, Flickr, Rats CCBY S.J. Pyrotechnic



# What's your Niche?

**T**hink of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers that help you learn, and people that produce food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a niche (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain. American martens eat many rodents and help keep rodent populations from growing too large.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has an important job and role. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will be unhealthy. At times, it may be hard to see an animal's niche. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that cause problems. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae. Many insects that skunks eat like to munch on farmers' crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of grass or soil they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

What's your niche? Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?







BE OUTSIDE

# IN WINTER!

BE OUTSIDE  
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Winter is a wonderful time to explore the outdoors! A blanket of new snow makes familiar places look quite different. Noisy streams become silent under ice and snow. Animals that you rarely see, like many furbearers, can now be “seen” when you find their tracks in the snow. Cold nips your cheeks and makes you look forward to a cup of hot chocolate after being outside.

Winter activities are many. Skiing and skating are great ways to enjoy winter. So are sledding and snowshoeing. If you do not have any equipment, you can still enjoy winter by just taking a walk in the snow. Build a snow fort with your friends or decorate your yard with snowmen. If it is snowing, catch some snowflakes on your mittens and use a magnifying glass to look at the beautiful crystals. Take a walk in new snow to see what animal tracks you can find. Look for bird nests in the trees. If you live near a river or lake, do some winter bird watching to look for bald eagles and ducks. Don't forget to check out the winter night sky. Cold, clear winter nights

can give you some great opportunities to see the stars.

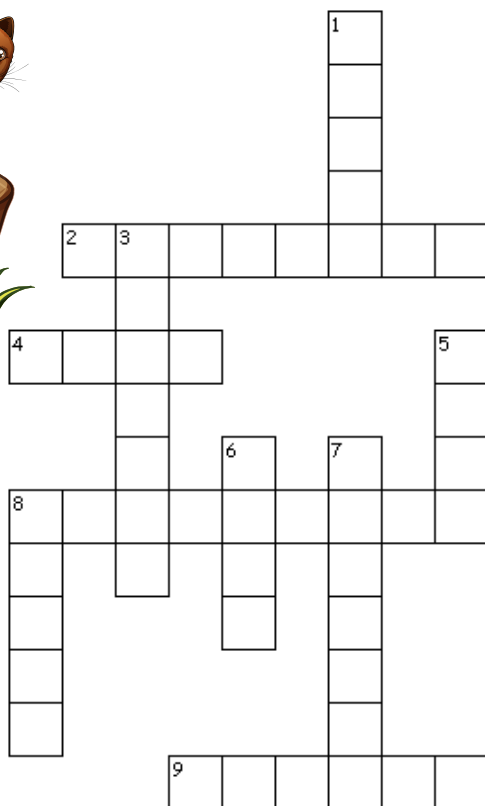
If you find a set of animal tracks, take a close look. Does the animal have hoof prints like a deer or footprints like a raccoon? Can you tell what direction the animal was going and how fast? Do the tracks go in one direction or do they wander around? Maybe the tracks suddenly end up disappearing under the snow. Following animal tracks in the snow is a fun way to learn about your wild neighbors.

No matter what kind of winter activity you enjoy, dressing properly is very important. Wear layers that you can take off when you warm up and put back on if you feel cold. Snow pants can help you stay warm and dry. Warm boots are very important for winter fun. Don't forget a hat and mittens! Wearing a hat is one of the best ways to stay warm, no matter what you are doing. So, get into your winter clothes and head outside for some winter fun. After all, winter is a big part of every year in Idaho!





# Marvelous American Martens



## Words

Carnivore

Claws

Forests

History

Kits

Musk

Niche

Vole

Weasel

Whiskers



## Across

2. Vibrissae is the fancy word for \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Martens use this to scent mark their territories.
8. This is an animal that eats meat.
9. American martens are members of the \_\_\_\_\_ family.

## Down

1. The word used to describe an animal's job in its environment.
3. Furbearers have played an important role in Idaho's \_\_\_\_\_.
5. This animal makes up most of the American marten's diet.
6. Baby martens are called \_\_\_\_\_.
7. American martens like to live in dense \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Martens have semi-retractable \_\_\_\_\_ that help them climb trees.

# Wildlife Express

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**Editor:** Adare Evans

**Lead Writer:** Adare Evans

**Layout:** Glenna Gomez

**Contributors:** Adare Evans, Lori Adams, Vicky Runnoe



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:

[adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov](mailto:adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov)

or

Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game

PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707